

Do Presidents Favor Co-Partisan Mayors in the Allocation of Federal Grants?

Heonuk Ha & Jeffery A. Jenkins

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Abstract

With the increasing nationalization of politics, federal politicians have interacted more and more with subnational actors. In particular, the president and governing party have provided selective policy and spending benefits to same-party jurisdictions in order to increase their influence in subnational politics. As a significant amount of federal grants is allocated directly to city governments, we analyze the effects of the federal-city relationship in the federal grant process. Specifically, we examine the effects of the president-mayor party alignment on the allocation of federal block and project grants to 568 medium and large cities from 2005 to 2020 using a two-way (city-year) fixed-effects model. We find that the president favors co-partisan mayors in the distribution of federal grants, especially co-partisan mayors from secure party cities and cities in states where the governor is also a co-partisan. Digging deeper, we find this form of presidential particularism is exclusively a Democratic pursuit.

Heonuk can be reached at heonukha@usc.edu and Jeffery can be reached at jenkinja@usc.edu

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American federalism dates back to the creation of the U.S. Constitution in 1787, which broadly divided the roles and authorities of federal and state governments. Since then, scholars have routinely debated the optimal level of power-sharing in the multi-layer governing structure. As a result, the federal and state dynamics of the public policy process have been the focal point in federalism studies (Bednar, Eskridge, and Ferejohn 2001, Rodden 2002, Conlan 2006).

The power and authority of U.S. cities are not defined in the Constitution, however. Since the Supreme Court ruling in *Hunter v. City of Pittsburgh* (1907), the legal status of cities has been regarded as the corporation of states (Clark et al. 1985). This has shaped the development of the scholarly literature, as previous studies have examined either a city's relationship with state government or (more recently) local political dynamics. Thus, the relationship between the federal government and local governments in the public policy process remains a puzzle.

With the increasing nationalization of politics and strong party influence in state and local policy processes, federal politicians have interacted more and more with subnational political actors, and the executive relationship, in particular, has become more critical. McCann (2016), for example, finds that the federal government delegates a substantial portion of its policy implementation to state and local governments, which results in governors and mayors exerting significant influence in federal policy implementation. Local politicians also increasingly interact with the public and stakeholders as front-line politicians in various policy areas (Einstein and Glick 2018). The president thus needs strong support from mayors to achieve his political and policy goals in an increasingly polarized environment.

Local politicians also need help from the federal government for their success in political careers and policy implementation. As federal issues have become more important to local elections, party cues and endorsements from federal politicians have become critical to local politicians (Hopkins 2018). Many local policies require support from the federal government, and local governments have relied heavily on fiscal transfers from federal or state governments

(Nunn, Parsons, and Shambaugh 2019). Importantly, many federal-local policy processes also do not involve state government; consequently, the political distance between federal and local governments has narrowed in our polarized society.

While previous research on distributive politics and federalism has focused almost exclusively on the federal-state relationship, this study analyzes the effects of the federal-local relationship in the allocation of federal grants¹. As a significant amount of federal grants is distributed directly to cities, bypassing the state government’s redistribution process, we examine the effects of the president-mayor party alignment on the allocation of federal block and project grants to 568 medium and large cities from 2005 to 2020.

The paper is organized as follows. Section 1 presents an overview of direct federal grant allocation to cities between FY2006 and FY2021. Section 2 introduces the various datasets, and Section 3 describes the analytic models and presents the results of our analysis, showing the effect of party alignment on presidential particularism in federal grant allocation. Section 4 concludes by discussing our findings and offering recommendations for future research.

1 Federal Grant Allocation to Cities

Although most distributive politics research focuses on the dynamics between the president and Congress (Berry, Burden, and Howell 2010, Kriner and Reeves 2015), some studies have examined the interplay between federal and state governments. Larcinese, Rizzo, and Testa (2006) and Nicholson-Crotty (2015), for example, find that governors of the president’s party receive more federal funds. However, no research has explored the direct relationship between federal and local governments in the public policy process.

In FY2021, for example, \$6 billion of block or project grants was directly distributed to cities.² Figure 1a shows the the allocation of direct federal grants to cities over a longer period, from FY2006 to FY2021. Although the yearly grant amount did not significantly

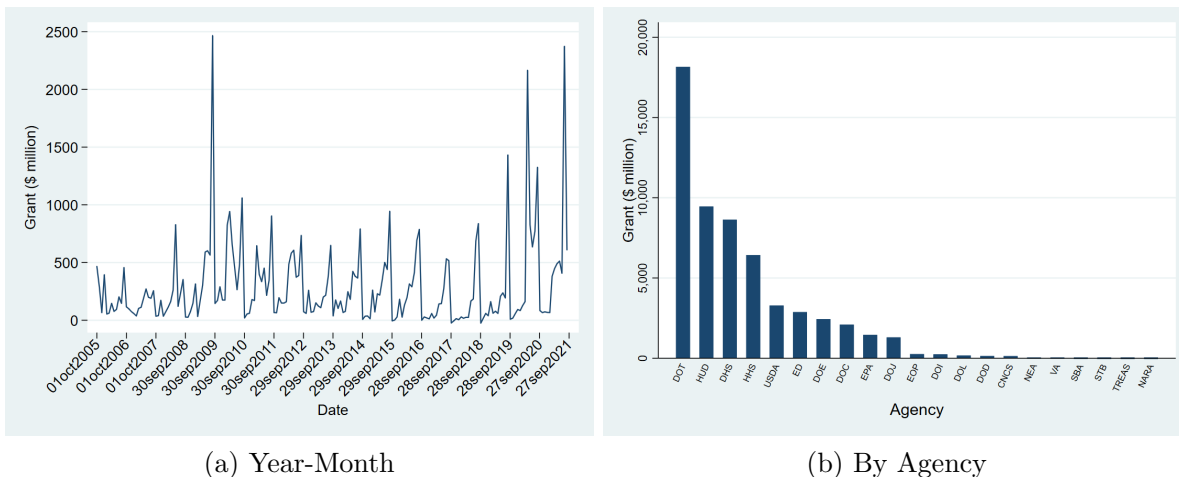
¹A parallel literature has also emerged recently that focuses on the state-local relationship. See, e.g., Payson (2020).

²Source: OMB Historical Table 12: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/omb/budget/historical-tables/>

increase during this period, the spending by the federal government more than doubled during two economic crises (the 2009 Great Recession and the COVID-19 pandemic).

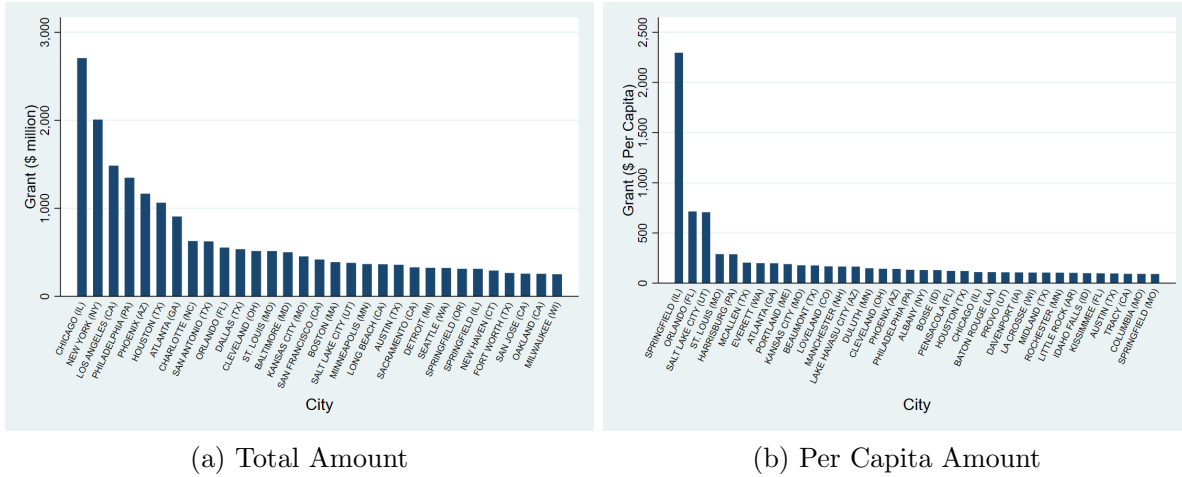
The Office of Management and Budget (OMB) reviews each agency’s grant allocation proposals and makes an apportionment plan to decide the funding level and timing. In this sense, the grant allocation process is controlled by the president’s *ex-post* influence (Berry, Burden, and Howell 2010). The federal government distributes grants directly to cities each year in the areas of transportation, housing, education, and community development. As shown in Figure 1b, the Department of Transportation (DOT) allocated over \$18 billion directly to cities between FY2005 and FY2021, while the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and Department of Homeland Security (DHS) distributed \$9 billion and \$8.5 billion, respectively, directly to cities during the same period. More detailed information is provided in Table B.1 in the Appendix.

Figure 1: Block and Project Grant to Cities (FY2006-2021)



Federal grant allocation to cities varies at both the total and per capita levels, as shown in Figure 2. The largest cities, such as Chicago, New York, and Los Angeles, received a considerable amount over time (FY2006-2021); however, Springfield (IL), Atlanta, and Salt Lake City received relatively larger amounts in per-capita terms.

Figure 2: Block and Project Grant to Cities (FY2006-2021), by City



2 Data and Variables

Formula grants are disbursed strictly based on eligibility criteria, whereas block and project grants allow discretion to the awarding agencies in deciding the recipient jurisdictions and allocation amount (Dilger and Cecire 2015). Therefore, we use 702 federal block and project grants that are allocated directly to city governments (i.e., those that do not pass through state governments).

To investigate the effects of the president-mayor relationship on federal grant allocation, we incorporate two different datasets. First, for federal grant data, we use the *Federal Assistance Awards Data System (FAADS)*, which has been the typical standard (Berry, Burden, and Howell 2010, Kriner and Reeves 2015). The *FAADS* data, collected and managed by the Department of Treasury and Census Bureau, provides extensive information on federal funds allocation at the award-level, such as types and purpose of federal funds, allocation timing and amount, awarding agency, and recipient’s name and address³. Second, we use the local political dataset assembled by Warsaw, de Benedictis-Kessner, and Velez (2022), which provides extensive information on local politics and elections for municipalities with populations over 50,000. It includes key variables like the partisanship of the mayor and

³For the award-level data, see USAspending: <https://www.usaspending.gov>

other candidates, vote counts of candidates, and election month and year. While other local datasets include cities with population thresholds over 75,000, 100,000, and 125,000, the Warshaw, de Benedictis-Kessner, and Velez’s (2022) dataset provides broader information on the 568 medium and large cities with populations greater than 50,000 over a longer time period. Detailed information on the Warshaw, de Benedictis-Kessner, and Velez’s (2022) local dataset is provided in Table [B.1](#) and Table [B.2](#) in the Appendix.

Of the 568 medium and large cities in our analysis, 63 (11%) do not have the mayor’s party information for the entire 16 years (2005 to 2020), and 19 do not have the mayor’s party information over 10 years. Therefore, 484 observations (5.3%) are missing from the full panel of 9,104 mayor-year observations. Democratic mayors are 51.8% of the sample and Republican mayors are 37%, while 11% of mayors’ partisanship is unknown. With respect to the mayor’s party alignment, 44.3% of mayors are from the president’s party, while 17% of mayor-year observations are classified as secure (i.e., mayor and election runner-up are from the same party). Also, 44% of governors are Democrats and 56% are Republicans during this time, and 24.8% of city-year observations are classified as the same party alignment among the president, governors, and mayors. With respect to cities by state in the dataset, California has the most (90), followed by Texas (48) and Florida (41).

For our dependent variable – *Per Cap (con\$)* – we use per-capita level grant allocation, based on 2012 real dollar value, to the cities. Since there are many cities that do not receive any federal grants each year, taking the logged amount of grant allocation raises concerns about zero-inflated bias in the analysis.

We include three key independent variables to analyze the effects of three types of president-mayor party alignments:

Mayor_Pres_Party: Takes a value of 1 if the partisanship between the president and mayor is the same, and 0 otherwise.

Secure_Mayor_Pres_Party: Takes a value of 1 if the partisanship between the president and mayor is the same and the top two candidates in a mayoral election are from the same

party, and 0 otherwise.

Mayor_Pres_Gover_Party: Takes a value of 1 if the partisanship among the president, governor, and mayor is the same, and 0 otherwise.

Finally, we also include three city-specific socioeconomic variables as controls, following Kriner and Reeves (2015): the logged value of total population, the logged value of income per capita, and the poverty rate⁴

3 Methods and Results

We use two-way (city-year) fixed effects with clustered standard errors by city to determine the effect of the three types of president-mayor party alignments on the federal grant process for the period between 2005 and 2020. Two-way fixed-effects controls for city-specific time-invariant features. We thus identify initially based on change in the partisanship of the president and/or change in the partisanship of a city’s mayor.

We employ three analytic models. First, we examine the effect of the president-mayor party alignment on the president’s particularistic grant allocation to cities (*Pres_Mayor_Party*). Second, we analyze the party alignment effect in one-party election cities (*Secure_Pres_Mayor_Party*), where the elected mayor and runner-up are from the same party (which we define as secure party cities). Finally, we consider how presidential particularism changes when the president, governor, and mayor are of the same party (*Pres_Gov_Mayor_Party*).

We first break down the effect of the president-mayor party alignment on the federal grant distribution in Table 1 and Table 2. For detailed information, refer to the complete tables in Appendix, specifically Table B.4 and Table B.5

Table 1 shows the effect of president-mayor party alignment on grant distributions to 568 cities between FY2006 and FY2021. Although the simple effect of party alignment washes out in Model (1), we find a positive and statistically significant effect in Models (2) and

⁴Population, income, and poverty data for each city come from the American Community Survey (ACS) data provided by the Census Bureau.

(3). The president allocates \$2.962 per capita more to co-partisan mayors in secure party cities and \$3.732 per capita more to co-partisan mayors in states with co-partisan governors. How big are these effects? As Table 8 in the Appendix indicates, the mean distribution was \$15.98 per capita with a standard deviation of \$51.88 per capita. So these significant effects would represent a 5.7% and 7.2% of a standard deviation increase, respectively.

Table 1: President-Mayor Party Alignment

	(1)	(2)	(3)
	Total Grant	Total Grant	Total Grant
	Per Capita (con\$)	Per Capita (con\$)	Per Capita (con\$)
Pres_Mayor_Party	0.0405 (0.878)		
Secure_Pres_Mayor_Party		2.962** (1.342)	
Pres_Gov_Mayor_Party			3.732***
Control Vars	✓	✓	✓
City & Year Fixed effects	✓	✓	✓
Observations	8,022	8,022	8,022
R-squared	0.028	0.028	0.029
Number of Cities	568	568	568

Standard errors (clustered by city) in parentheses

*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

Table 2 goes a step further by breaking out the president by party, which allows us to compare effects across Republican and Democratic presidents during our time period.⁵ Identification here comes exclusively from the changing partisanship of a city’s mayor. We see that Democratic presidents are more particularistic in terms of grant allocation – with Republican presidents nominally negative across all president-mayor categories – and these effects are statistically significant in terms of co-partisan mayors in secure party cities (Model 2) and co-partisan mayors in states with co-partisan governors (Model 3). Democratic presidents allocate \$6.005 per capita more to secure co-partisan cities and \$7.939 per capita

⁵Our timeframe includes two Republican presidents – George W. Bush and Donald Trump – and one Democratic president – Barack Obama.

more to cities with co-partisan mayors and co-partisan governors. These amounts represent a 11.6% and 15.3% of a standard deviation increase, respectively.

Table 2: President-Mayor Party Alignment, Interaction with Democratic President

	(1)	(2)	(3)
	Total Grant	Total Grant	Total Grant
	Per Capita (con\$)	Per Capita (con\$)	Per Capita (con\$)
Dem Pres	75.48 (72.57)	94.83 (71.38)	91.61 (71.46)
Pres_Mayor_Party	-0.612 (2.593)		
Pres_Mayor_Party #Dem Pres	1.836 (4.912)		
Secure_Pres_Mayor_Party		-0.169 (1.994)	
Secure_Pres_Mayor_Party #Dem Pres		6.174* (3.443)	
Pres_Gov_Mayor_Party			-0.418 (1.766)
Pres_Gov_Mayor_Party #Dem Pres			8.357** (3.326)
Control Vars	✓	✓	✓
City & Year Fixed effects	✓	✓	✓
Observations	8,022	8,022	8,022
R-squared	0.028	0.029	0.030
Number of Cities	568	568	568

Robust standard errors in parentheses

*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

Note: clustered standard errors at city level.

These results provide a definitive answer to the question motivating this paper: presidents do favor co-partisan mayors in the allocation of federal grants. Particularism takes the form of significantly more per-capita grant money in the cases of co-partisan mayors in secure party cities and co-partisan mayors in states with co-partisan governors. And these significant results appear to be driven exclusively by Democratic presidents. As our timeframe spans 2005-2020, this is in fact an "Obama effect."

4 Conclusion

Recent research in American politics finds that the president strategically uses federal funds as one of several powerful governing resources, along with appointments and the veto, to pursue his policy and political goals. As the leader of his party, the president provides selective spending benefits to his co-partisan members in Congress. We find that the partisan alignment in grant allocation goes beyond the federal level. Specifically, we find evidence of presidential particularism in the distribution of federal grant funds to co-partisan mayors, which is driven by Democratic presidents. Future work should extend our timeframe and add more (Democratic) presidencies to explore the robustness of this result, as well as explore the partisan motivations of presidents in distributing grants (along with funding alternatives like loans and contracts).

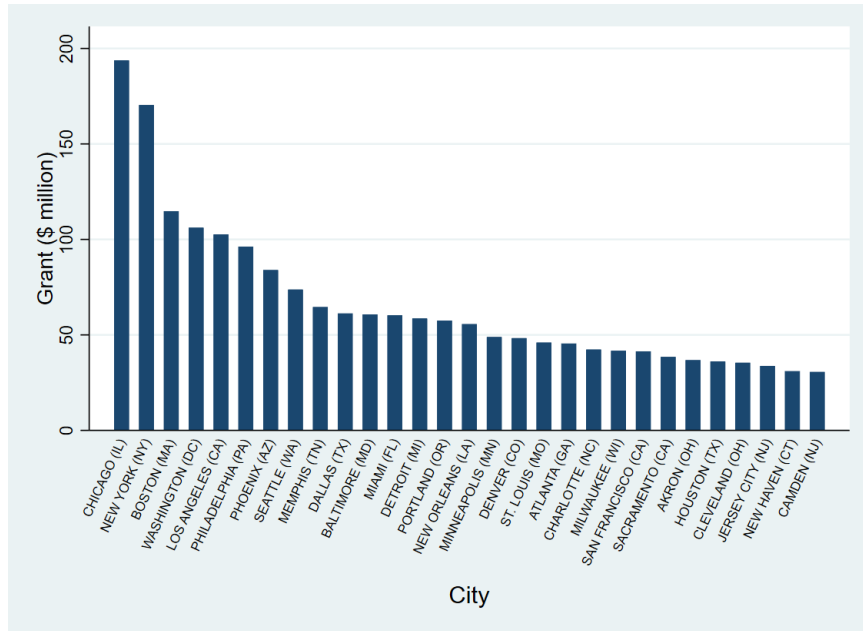
Our findings also suggest that scholars should continue to emphasize the effect of local political economy using advanced local datasets. For example, Brollo and Nannicini (2012) analyze federal grant allocation with respect to the timing of local elections in Brazil, but there have been no similar research in the U.S. context. Collecting the dates of local elections would solve this problem. Other research might analyze the grant distribution to counties, special districts, NGOs, and private institutions; this is possible now, as the FAADS dataset provides broad information on the receiving jurisdictions. Finally, studies of federalism should better highlight the close relationship between the federal and local governments. Mayors are deeply connected to the federal government in broad policy areas, and they have attempted to exert a stronger influence in the policy process by organizing cooperative governments, such as Councils of Governments (COGs) and Metropolitan Planning Organizations (MPOs). These relatively new local institutions are ripe areas for study.

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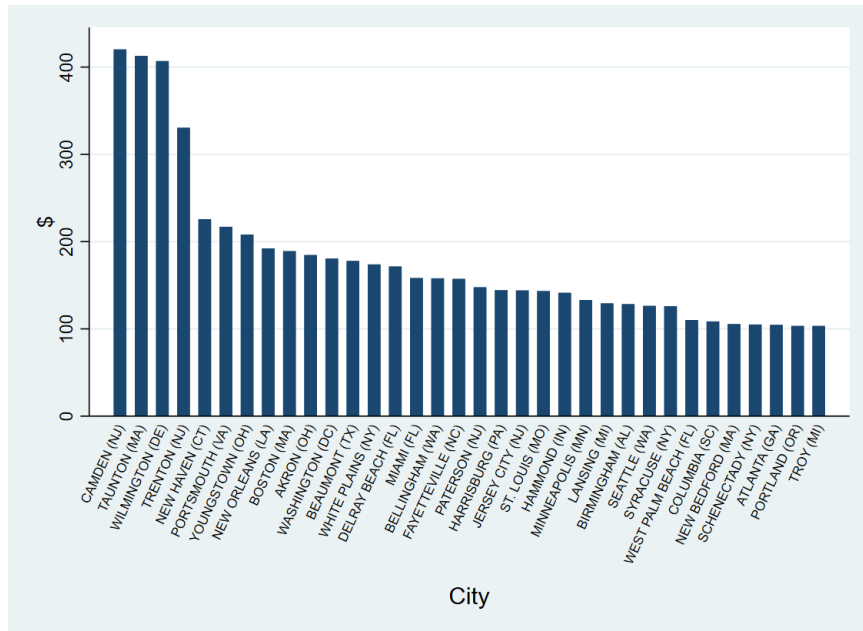
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Figure A.2: Grant: Housing



(a) Housing

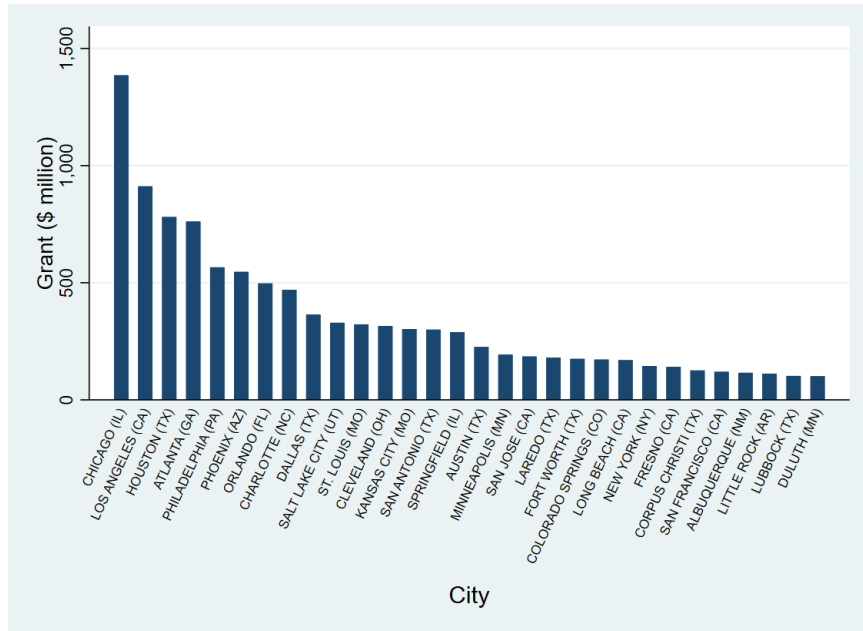


(b) Housing, Per Capita

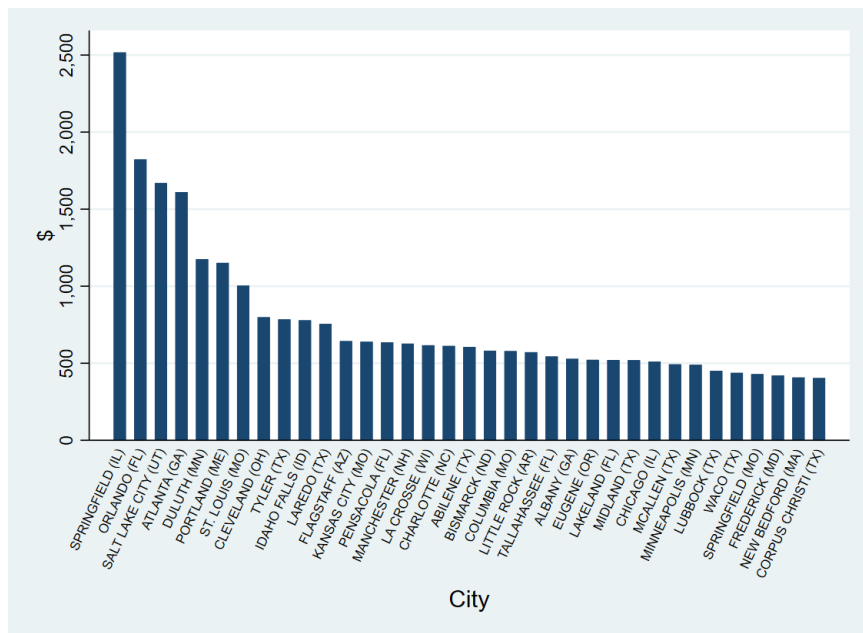
Source FAADS (USAspending) <https://www.usaspending.gov>

Note: Cities with a relatively higher percentage of poverty have received larger housing grants.

Figure A.3: Grant: Transportation



(a) Transportation

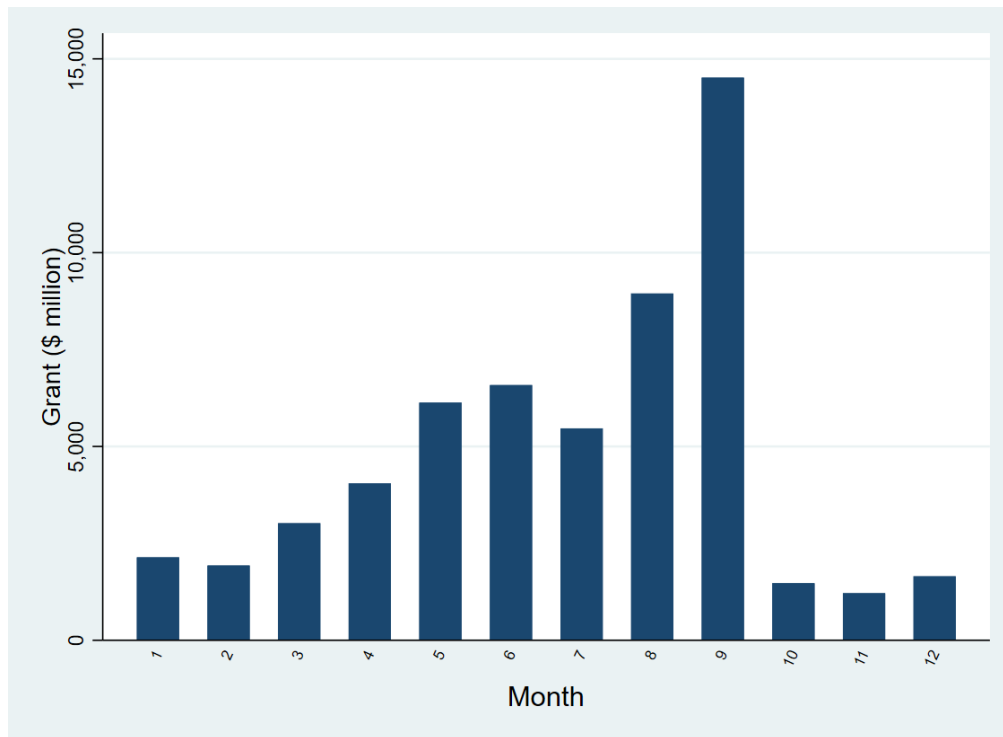


(b) Transportation, Per Capita

Source FAADS (USAspending) <https://www.usaspending.gov>

Note: Cities with a large population or a higher population density have received relatively larger amounts of transportation grants.

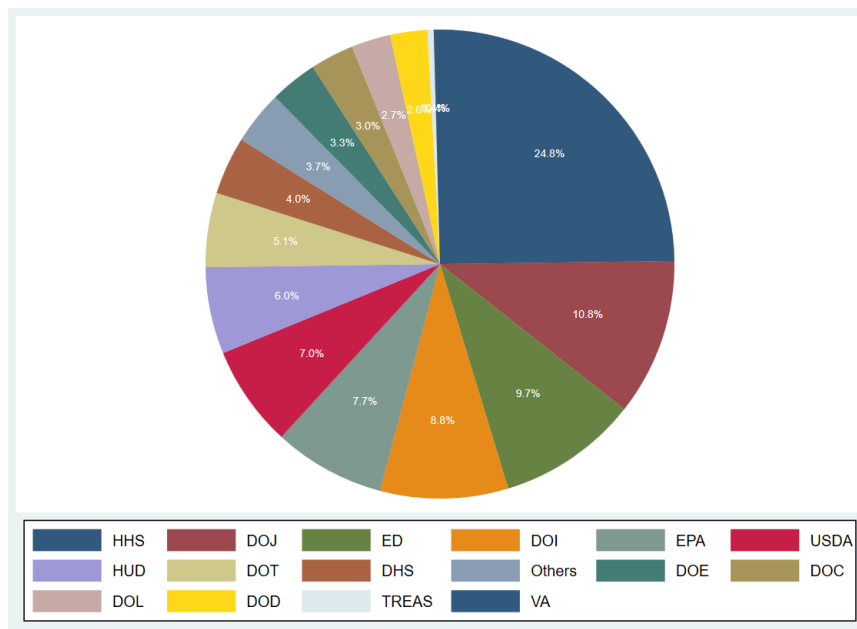
Figure A.4: Block and Project Grant to Cities (FY2006-2021), by month



Source FAADS (USAspending) <https://www.usaspending.gov>

Note: Federal agencies award more than 40% of block and project grants in the last quarter of each fiscal year, and their spending is concentrated in the last month of the fiscal year. This is because agencies take months to review grant applications from subnational governments, and they want to spend all the remaining money to claim the next year's budget increase.⁶

Figure A.5: Block and Project Grant to Cities (FY2006-2021), by Agency



Source FAADS (USAspending) <https://www.usaspending.gov>

Note: This pie chart shows the number of grants allocated to cities: the Department of Health and Human Services has distributed the most – a quarter of total federal grants – followed by the Department of Justice and the Department of Education.

B Appendix: Tables

Table B.1: Direct Block and Project Grants to Cities, By Agency

Awarding Agency	# of Grant	Percent	Grant amount (mil)	Percent
CORPORATION FOR NATIONAL AND COMMUNITY SERVICE (CNCS)	7	1	135.8508	0.24
DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE (USDA)	49	6.98	3306.056	5.73
DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE (DOC)	21	2.99	2093.452	3.63
DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE (DOD)	18	2.56	135.7589	0.24
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION (ED)	68	9.69	2874.681	4.98
DEPARTMENT OF ENERGY (DOE)	23	3.28	2455.676	4.26
DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES (HHS)	174	24.79	6793.063	11.78
DEPARTMENT OF HOMELAND SECURITY (DHS)	28	3.99	8660.925	15.02
DEPARTMENT OF HOUSING AND URBAN DEVELOPMENT (HUD)	42	5.98	9563.192	16.58
DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE (DOJ)	76	10.83	1300.725	2.26
DEPARTMENT OF LABOR (DOL)	19	2.71	174.958	0.30
DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR (DOI)	62	8.83	246.6136	0.43
DEPARTMENT OF THE TREASURY (TREAS)	3	0.43	2.121759	0.00
DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION (DOT)	36	5.13	18162.22	31.49
DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS (VA)	3	0.43	20.02576	0.03
ELECTION ASSISTANCE COMMISSION (EAC)	1	0.14	0.025	0.00
ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION AGENCY (EPA)	54	7.69	1459.218	2.53
EXECUTIVE OFFICE OF THE PRESIDENT (EOP)	1	0.14	258.6605	0.45
INSTITUTE OF MUSEUM AND LIBRARY SERVICES (IMLS)	5	0.71	3.056906	0.01
NATIONAL AERONAUTICS AND SPACE ADMINISTRATION (NASA)	3	0.43	4.103655	0.01
NATIONAL ARCHIVES AND RECORDS ADMINISTRATION (NARA)	1	0.14	1.222121	0.00
NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE ARTS (NEA)	1	0.14	20.75227	0.04
SMALL BUSINESS ADMINISTRATION (SBA)	4	0.57	5.096253	0.01
SOCIAL SECURITY ADMINISTRATION (SSA)	1	0.14	0.921455	0.00
SURFACE TRANSPORTATION BOARD (STB)	2	0.28	3.156556	0.01

Table B.2: Number of Cities by State

	# City	# City %	# of City-Year	# of Pres-Mayor party alignment	# of Secure party alignment	# of Pres-Gov-Mayor party alignment
ALABAMA	8	1.41	128	55	18	35
ALASKA	1	0.18	16	2	0	0
ARIZONA	14	2.46	224	119	33	37
ARKANSAS	5	0.88	66	32	13	32
CALIFORNIA	90	15.82	1378	525	211	331
COLORADO	13	2.28	187	90	34	50
CONNECTICUT	11	1.93	176	88	24	64
DELAWARE	1	0.18	16	8	0	8
DC	1	0.18	16	8	7	0
FLORIDA	41	7.21	615	271	118	110
GEORGIA	10	1.76	145	69	18	29
IDAHO	4	0.7	44	24	8	16
ILLINOIS	29	5.1	458	201	86	111
INDIANA	15	2.64	240	120	8	60
IOWA	10	1.76	158	81	28	26
KANSAS	7	1.23	104	46	20	14
KENTUCKY	4	0.7	64	30	13	23
LOUISIANA	7	1.23	98	54	22	10
MAINE	1	0.18	11	7	6	2
MARYLAND	5	0.88	62	28	9	27
MASSACHUSETTS	19	3.34	272	127	82	120
MICHIGAN	23	4.04	342	156	56	65
MINNESOTA	20	3.51	282	95	28	61
MISSISSIPPI	2	0.35	28	12	3	4
MISSOURI	10	1.76	145	62	35	62
MONTANA	3	0.53	48	16	12	16
NEBRASKA	4	0.7	64	30	8	12
NEVADA	6	1.05	96	53	11	19
NEW HAMPSHIRE	2	0.35	32	10	2	4
NEW JERSEY	13	2.28	205	96	48	25
NEW MEXICO	4	0.7	61	25	1	12
NEW YORK	13	2.28	208	110	28	99
NORTH CAROLINA	18	3.16	260	101	28	44
NORTH DAKOTA	2	0.35	32	11	0	7
OHIO	16	2.81	228	110	40	40
OKLAHOMA	6	1.05	94	36	12	17
OREGON	10	1.76	151	71	17	43
PENNSYLVANIA	9	1.58	144	72	12	27
RHODE ISLAND	4	0.7	64	27	8	18
SOUTH CAROLINA	4	0.7	64	29	2	13
SOUTH DAKOTA	2	0.35	31	21	6	12
TENNESSEE	10	1.76	150	73	39	28
TEXAS	48	8.44	735	334	175	248
UTAH	10	1.76	156	56	32	46
VIRGINIA	10	1.76	149	70	24	26
WASHINGTON	14	2.46	224	96	47	62
WISCONSIN	9	1.58	133	56	26	21
WYOMING	1	0.18	16	8	7	4

Table B.3: Summary Statistics

variable	N	min	max	mean	sd
Grant, Per Capita	8328	-47.18	2852.28	15.98	51.88
Pres-Mayor Party Align	8620	0	1	0.44	0.50
Secure Pres-Mayor Party Align	8620	0	1	0.17	0.38
Pres-Gov-Mayor Party Align	8620	0	1	0.25	0.43
Total Population	8328	38989	8560072	191162	456601
Income Per Capita	8328	10544	93085	28071	9093
Poverty Rate	8022	0.01	0.31	0.08	0.04

Table B.4: President-Mayor Party Alignment

	(1)	(2)	(3)
	Total Grant	Total Grant	Total Grant
	Per Capita (con \$)	Per Capita (con \$)	Per Capita (con \$)
Pres_Mayor_Party	0.0405 (0.878)		
Secure_Pres_Mayor_Party		2.962** (1.342)	
Pres_Gov_Mayor_Party			3.732*** (1.135)
Population (Logged)	26.40 (16.84)	25.26 (16.81)	23.19 (16.84)
Income (Logged)	-17.25 (25.08)	-16.87 (25.04)	-14.86 (25.17)
Poverty rate	-31.42 (76.66)	-33.20 (76.41)	-21.76 (77.38)
Constant	-121.3 (350.3)	-111.9 (349.5)	-109.5 (349.5)
Observations	8,022	8,022	8,022
R-squared	0.028	0.028	0.029
Number of Cities	568	568	568
City FE	YES	YES	YES
Year FE	YES	YES	YES

Standard errors (clustered by city) in parentheses

*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

Table B.5: President-Mayor Party Alignment, Interaction with Democratic President

	(1)	(2)	(3)
	Total Grant	Total Grant	Total Grant
	Per Capita (con \$)	Per Capita (con \$)	Per Capita (con \$)
Dem Pres	75.48	94.83	91.61
	(72.57)	(71.38)	(71.46)
Pres_Mayor_Party	-0.612		
	(2.593)		
Pres_Mayor_Party	1.836		
#Dem Pres	(4.912)		
Secure_Pres_Mayor_Party		-0.169	
		(1.994)	
Secure_Pres_Mayor_Party		6.174*	
#Dem Pres		(3.443)	
Pres_Gov_Mayor_Party			-0.418
			(1.766)
Pres_Gov_Mayor_Party			8.357**
#Dem Pres			(3.326)
Population (Logged)	25.85	25.31	22.91
#Rep Pres	(16.55)	(16.84)	(16.87)
Population (Logged)	23.44	22.61	20.44
#Dem Pres	(16.04)	(16.31)	(16.30)
Income (Logged)	-17.17	-16.31	-15.05
#Rep Pres	(24.67)	(24.60)	(24.69)
Income (Logged)	-21.86	-22.50	-21.34
#Dem Pres	(27.31)	(27.15)	(27.19)
Poverty rate	-35.39	-28.26	-26.16
#Rep Pres	(81.71)	(81.32)	(80.76)
Poverty rate	-45.72	-53.85	-41.84
#Dem Pres	(92.30)	(90.24)	(91.09)
Constant	-115.7	-118.8	-103.6
	(349.3)	(350.1)	(350.8)
Observations	8,022	8,022	8,022
R-squared	0.028	0.029	0.030
Number of Cities	568	568	568
City FE	YES	YES	YES
Year FE	YES	YES	YES

Robust standard errors in parentheses

*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

Note: clustered standard errors at city level.